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ABSTRACT

This document is an analysis of literary quotations and the opinions of high school students on the nature of culture and the goal of man. It is written from the vantage point of a high school teacher who has sought the opinions of his students. The "Youth culture" that exists in American society seems to be motivated by a combination of factors, including a skepticism toward contemporary adult values, a search for the answer to the question of a personal identity, a kind of idealism-critical of adult life-styles, and a demand for tolerance in allowing the individual to find his "own way." (CK)

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YOUTH CULTURE: REFLECTIONS AND CREATIONS

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Seeing and touching our hopes,
feeling our own reactions to each other,
guarding with painful curiosity our hearts,
roaming like ice through the mountains -

by

Vincent C. D'Amico

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> The individual is central; the individual, in the deepest sense, is the culture, not the institution. His culture resides in him, in experience and memory, and what is needed is an education that has as its base the sanctity of the individual's experience and leaves it intact.
>
> ("The Open Truth and Fiery Vehemence of Youth - A Sort of Soliloquy" - Peter Marin, 1969)

In very recent times, few subjects have attracted the audience of America's reading public like the sometimes scholarly and frequently frightening treatises on today's youth rebellion. This revolution in young attitudes has been researched by some of our most eminent social scientist, among them Margaret Meade, who goes so far as to say that we who were born before the second world war are like immigrants in a country in which the young are the original settlers. Charles Reich in The Greening of America speaks of "Consciousness III," that new stage of social development, that new liberation of the individual, that allows the young to create their own life-style. And Alvin Toffler has recently startled us with his bestseller, Future Shock, in which he interprets the surfeit of subcults in America as a "subcult explosion," where the new concept of "over-choice" accelerates change among youth at a revolutionary rate, that has not been paralleled in human history. Those, then, who are perhaps remote from yet interested in this phenomenon called the "youth culture" have an abundance of valid research data upon which to rely. I believe that those of us, who as teachers, who come into daily contact with young people, can also

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become researchers into the lively realm of the "youth culture." Especially in the English classroom, where the expression of ideas and opinions should be the motivation of all creative activity, the sources of these youthful attitudes would seem to demand clear identification as well as creative expression.

Recently, on returning from an NCTE Study Group on Youth Culture, I decided to identify the sources of "youth culture" among my high school English students. Their first reaction to my suggestion of a unit on "youth culture" was one of guarded interest. Suddenly, I seemed to be an intruder into a vague realm, the boundaries of which I found later to be only vaguely defined.

In an effort to guide them in their search for an identity, the following questions were suggested for discussion:

1. What does the term "culture" mean to you?
2. Is it possible for a country to exhibit several identifiable cultures simultaneously?
3. Assuming that "youth culture" is an identifiable segment in American society, what factors help to shape it?
4. Are there various styles of "youth culture" in American society?
5. What forms of art or entertainment seem to reflect American "youth culture"?
6. What creative projects might English students use to mirror their own ideas about the "youth culture"?

In order to provide an open atmosphere for the discussion of these questions, each of the four classes involved was encouraged to divide into several clusters, each determining its own chairman and recorder. The membership in each cluster proved generally to be a cross-section of each class, and the importance placed on each of the questions was determined by the membership in each cluster. In order to preserve an accurate record of each cluster's contribution, an informal, oral

summary was given by each group, allowing each member to express his opinion on any question. These summary remarks were tape recorded and became a lively commentary on their attitudes. As each cluster presented its summary remarks, any other student within the class with opposing viewpoints or observations was encouraged to express his opinion. These remarks became a vital part of the student interaction. Ultimately, it was in this lively interchange of ideas and opinions that the most vibrant areas of the "youth culture" were exposed.

The initial discussion question focused attention on the students' understanding of the term "culture." A student consensus on its meaning suggested that man seems naturally disposed to create a community life-style. In earlier times, community life provided for personal safety and community survival. Curiously, in our present space-age, these motivations for community life were observed to have changed only in the degree of their sophistication. In addition to these essential motivations for community life, the variables inherent in the formation of community living were also considered. Principal among these variables was the factor of environment. Apparently, a community forms its life-style in relation to the physical resources inherent at a given place. Students cited the pioneering spirit in early America and the attraction of the "American dream" as evidence of this nation's potentials for physical, economic, and social expansion. Charles Reich identifies this period in American social history as Consciousness I, a time of liberation and vision - a period regretably brief and perhaps gone forever.

The students considered the most essential cultural variable to be the extent of individual fulfillment possible within a community structure. It was in this area of individual fulfillment that they were most vehement in their opinions. In American society, where the goals of

technology seem to be thrust upon them, and a life-style that extends this sophisticated structure seems to encircle them, these students felt that individualism is denied them. They were definite in their criticism of American social values - values that would make youth the descendants of a community structure that has sacrificed human progress for technological advancement. Charles Reich would say that the freedom of Consciousness I was replaced by the voice of Consciousness II that says, "' Ask what you can do for your country (and corporation).'" Culture to these students, then, seemed to signify the community "establishment" as reflected in an adult life-style - a life-style whose reflection they consider "clearly" distorted.

Their most significant remarks included these:

> "Culture is a way of life - customs, ideas, relationships."
>
> "Culture nurtures the seed of the future."
>
> "No longer does man seem to strive for personal fulfillment - that success of doing something that fulfills <u>you</u>."
>
> "20th century man has lost the individuality that youth are trying to express in themselves."
>
> "Man is richer than what he has given himself."

From a criticism of adult cultural values, the students turned their attention to the possibility of various cultures co-existing in American society. The comments of the majority of them were affirmative - that cultural co-existence does occur in American society and that today this cultural co-existence is flourishing. The environmental variations from coast to coast, the emphasis on greater individual fulfillment, and the emergence of an impatient idealism were considered the most important factors in the formation of the life-styles currently established in various segments of America. And once again, the importance

of providing for individual fulfillment within any cultural community was considered the most essential factor in evaluating any particular life-style. The co-existence of various cultural unities was considered an essential corollory of American society if the individual's "pursuit of happiness" is to be fulfilled. Because of the diversity of personal goals, divergent life-styles must be expected in American society as a matter of course. B.F Skinner in his recent book, Beyond Freedom and Dignity, compares cultures that differ as one might compare different species that share an anatomical feature. This proliferation of cultures is like the process of natural evolution, which includes the same factors necessary for the continuation of any species. Unless members of a cultural community can adjust to change, they will be left on the beach, bewildered and lost.

Student remarks that reflected their point of view on divergent life-styles included these:

> "And culture is like a great river - moving, flowing, branching - with streams going from it."
>
> "Each person expresses his own culture in himself."
>
> "Your culture is doing your own thing!"
>
> "You've got to keep an open mind."

As these "rap" sessions now approached the essential elements of their own life-style, these students became more intense in their remarks. Their opinions became increasingly polarized, and their remarks reflected more personal feelings. At times, the intensity of their observations approached a free, poetic style.

In answer to the question of the existence of a "youth culture," these young people replied with a resounding "Yes!" The factors that

seemed necessary for the existence of a youth culture were considered to be several, although they seemed to agree that a youthful point of view was more important than any group of "youth" factors. Essentially, a youth culture seems to exhibit many of the same factors inherent in any cultural unit; these include moral and ethical codes, political opinions, an appreciation of the arts (especially music and dance), fashions in dress, literature (especially poetry), forms of entertainment, the desire for individual fulfillment within some community, the search for self-identity (perhaps the strongest motivation of their culture). These factors surfaced frequently and that regardless of the discussion subjects being considered. The obvious fragmentation within their culture was considered the result of the divergent opinions among youth regarding personal ideals and goals. Alvin Toffler in Future Shock remarks that the fragmentation of societies brings with it a diversification of values and that we are indeed witnessing the crack-up of consensus.

In addition to the differences among various youth groups, several factors were considered important in uniting youth generally. Principal among these unifying factors was a desire to achieve some real measure of personal fulfillment, together with a firm intention of gaining a meaningful voice in determining the future of American society. An additional unifying factor surfaced during the "rap" sessions when some serious threat to the prusuit of personal goals was mentioned. Apparently, the need for a cultural unity has not changed essentialy, and a common threat to the goals of a community, whether that community is youth or adult oriented, unifies divergent points of view as nothing else.

Generally, then, "youth culture" seems to be motivated by a combi-

nation of factors, among them being a skepticism toward contemporary adult values; a search for the answer to the question of a personal identity; a kind of idealism, critical of adult life-styles; and a demand for tolerance in allowing the individual to find his "own way." Essentially, it is an attitude about life that young people share - an attitude reflected in a personal life-style, beginning for them at that time in their lives when they begin to think for themselves and continuing, perhaps more realistically, until emerging responsibilities direct them to less expressive ways of life. In their own words;

> "Youth culture is a state of mind."
>
> "Even though young people don't always agree, youth culture is a way of life to most of us, and it includes those ideas that concern us at this time in our lives."
>
> "Our youth culture will grow older with us, and our own youth culture will disappear. But maybe some of our ideas will be reborn with other youth to come."
>
> "Our culture is identified by our speaking out here today. What concerns us <u>is</u> our culture!"
>
> "Don't forbid it; try to understand it."

In this plea of youth for total choice, which Alvin Toffler terms "a meaningless concept," a major obstacle in communication suddenly appears. If each person were to be wholly different from every other, no two humans would have any basis for communication. The sociologist Karl Mannheim identified this contradiction when he wrote: "The more individualized people are, the more difficult it is to attain identification." As Alvin Toffler remarks further, this goal of total individuality raises severe problems of social integration and social values, at a time when society is fragmenting at the level of these very values.

In conclusion, he ends his chapter on "The Diversity of Life Styles" with these startling remarks:

> "Which of many potential selves shall we choose to be? What sequence of serial selves will describe us? How, in short, must we deal with overchoice at this, the most intensely personal and emotion-laden level of all? In our headlong rush for variety, choice and freedom, we have not yet begun to examine the awesome implications of diversity."
>
> "When diversity, however, converges with transience and novelty, we rocket the society toward an historical crisis of adaptation. We create an environment so ephemeral, unfamiliar and complex as to threaten millions with adaptive breakdown. This breakdown is future shock."

If Alvin Toffler is right, perhaps my students and those of their generation will live through a time so challenging that another heroic age in man's history will begin to emerge.

Throughout this youthful search for values, the degree of understanding and tolerance evidenced was both impressive and refreshing. Perhaps this sincere attitude of concern for the feelings and opinions of others is an indication of our young generation's ability to find social order out of the surfeit of social values swirling about them.

In Marshall McLuhan's provocative book, Understanding Media - The Extensions of Man, the author speaks of "media as translator," that "media is the message." During this stage of the "youth culture" study, various media - poetry readings, recordings of popular young singers, group singing with guitar accompanyment - became the translators of the ideas, opinions, and feelings of these young people. The importance of media to them is probably best expressed by their own remarks:

> "Music shows so many variations - highs, lows, pitches, feedbacks - that personal involvement with the music comes easy."

"I think one of the things that youth is trying to get back to today is the courage to touch his fellow man, to try communication with him. And if someone writes a piece of poetry or sings a song, it is a part of himself - it is a giving of himself, and it is a way to touch and to feel others - to extend yourself - to give a part of yourself. And I think that is what many of us are trying to do."

"Youth has both an expressive and a creative culture. And as the lives of young people change so do the ways of expression and creation."

"Music has its fluidity and poetry does, too. And today's young people are trying to remove the barriers for more free expression of their feelings. And music and poetry seem to echo these personal feelings."

"Music lets you say,'Wow! I felt that way before.!"

"We identify with these people (musicians, artists, singers) because they are seeking the same things that we are - some kind of individual expression."

"Just watching the artist at work, himself feeling the music - that's a beautiful thing."

Through the media of modern poetry, contemporary songs, and folk ballads, the "messages" of their culture were translated clearly, and certainly in a way superior to traditional forms. The intensity of their feelings and the free style of their media merged into one.

This media/message relationship was considered by the students at length, and the following recordings were selected as the most expressive of their "youth culture message":

"Monster" - Steppenwolfe
"One Tin Soldier" - Original Caste
"Mercedes-Benz" - Janis Joplin
"Ball of Confusion" - Temptations
"Two Hangmen" - Mason Profit
"Daughters and Sons" - Lighthouse
"Teach Your Children" - Crosby,Stills, Nash, Young
"Almost Cut My Hair" - Crosby, Stills, Nash
"Blowin' in the Wind" - Bob Dylan
"Sounds of Silence" - Simon & Garfunkel
"Dawning Is the Day" - The Moody Blues

"The Balance" - The Moody Blues
"Tommy" - The Who
"Put Your Hand in the Hand" - Ocean
"Come Together" - The Beatles

These songs and ballads focused attention on contemporary life in America, and through the lyrics these "messages" flowed:

> "Americans, what have we spawned? Don't you know that greed can destroy us? Be yourself, not what money can make you. How long will it take for us to listen to the things worth hearing and to look at the things worth seeing? So the world is in confusion - get involved! But never surrender your individualism. Just try to find the balance in life, and different generations can live together."

In addition to these popular songs and ballads, the following novels were considered essential reading in youth's search for a meaningful identity:

Native Son	The Invisible Man
A Separate Peace	The Spook That Sat by the Door
Another Country	The Chosen
The Catcher in the Rye	Run, Man, Run
The Man Who Cried I Am	The Promise

Among the poetry collections, Rod McKuen's volume, Listen to the Warm, was the favorite. During the course of this youth culture unit, many of his poems were read aloud by them.

This media segment concluded the students' participation as discussants. Suggestions for creative projects that would reflect their cultural identity included these activities:

Creative episodes	Short story
One-act plays	Original poetry
"Open letter to the world"	Editorial

Personal interview (written into an extensive article)
Film of some situation (written into an in-depth commentary on the situation viewed)

In each of these activities, the elements of setting, background, point of view, tone, and theme were stressed as the most effective means of presenting a clear message - a message that should reflect realistically the ideals and goals of their culture.

In the final analysis, the value of such a study into youth's cultural identity lies with an increased awareness of their own diversity as individuals and with a more intense desire to express themselves honestly. As was expressed by one of them:

> Seeing and touching our hopes,
> feeling our own reactions to each other,
> guarding with painful curiosity our hearts,
> roaming like ice through the mountains -

Of perhaps greater value from such a venture is the insight gained by the teacher, who has been given the opportunity to share in youth's searching for values, directions, and goals. Admittedly, these one hundred young people who were involved in this study cannot speak for all young Americans, but as professional educators, should this reality discourage us from listening to those young people who do come our way? I think not.

"Pax vobiscum!"

Vincent C. D'Amico - 1971